

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The Company Wars

Earth sent out colonies via pusher-ships to what became the Hinder Stars, a series of minor stars that provided the essentials of space-faring life: metals and life chemicals. That anchored bases for the far-traveling sunlight ships that took very, very long to complete what became the Great Circle trade, back to Sol and out again . . . hence the symbol of the EC, the Earth Company, a circle of stars.

Earth wanted to regulate the pusher-ships, wanted to dictate who flew and who didn't, wanted to install the crews, wanted to own the ships—but the crews who spent their lives on the long, slow traverse of the Great Circle weren't Earthers any longer, not by the time they reached a port many of them had never seen. Earth-based crews had to start out on their own ships, because the longtime pusher crews weren't willing to come ashore: Their homes were their ships, their lives stretched long between the stars, their cultures unique to the ship of their birth.

The inhabitants of the far-flung stations grew just as isolate, just as locally minded.

But Earth was the only source of luxury goods, and the only source of a mother-culture that held civilization together.

The discovery of Pell's World at what became known as Pell's Star ended the dependency of the colonists on Earth. A new earthlike planet

redefined everything—and made a second Circle Trade with a loop ending at Pell. Earth no longer dictated.

And then a scientist at a farther base came up with faster-than-light, and ships left the Circle to convert to the new technology.

Earth found it out when a faster-than-light starship arrived in its port.

Everything changed. Earth saw wealth out there it thought it ought to be able to tax.

The colonists disagreed.

Earth began losing its brightest and best to emigration . . . and started requiring visas and restricting travel.

The brightest and best at the nearest stars, those Earth could most easily reach, ran farther and fast to get out of Earth's reach—and established a wildcat colony at Cyteen.

Earth tried to seize control of the merchant ships that served the colonies. Certain ships and stations agreed with Earth and feared the strangeness of Cyteen, and certain of the Hinder Stars attempted to enforce the visas on the merchant ships.

The merchant ships, notably *Finity's End*, resisted. There were fatalities, trade shutdown, and finally shots were fired. Cyteen began building merchant ships.

So did Pell.

Certain forces inside Earth's many governments knew they were losing control not only of their colonies, but also of a situation that could spiral way out of control. They could survive being cut off from trade—but they would have to surrender to any armed starship that showed up on their doorstep. They saw a future in which Earth might be ruled from outside, by interests as foreign to their own as any alien they had ever dreamed of meeting.

They had to do something.

They had the resources. They had to do something, do it fast, do it secretly and throw support to those spacefarers who were still loyal to the idea of Earth. If they didn't, they would lose their last allies, either to defeat, or to pragmatic acceptance of the new powers in the deep Beyond.

Their survival hinged on supplying those loyal forces. Not everyone on Earth understood that. Not every government and every leader believed it . . . but enough did. Not every government in the solar system was following the same agenda: Sol Station's Earth Company and Mars saw a chance, while pursuing their collective survival, to get power into their own hands and away from the nations of Earth itself.

And there were, inevitably, the venal and self-interested, and those who hoped that if they ignored the threat it would just go away

The Earth Company had its own motives: By jostling the nations of Earth into this and that decision for its own benefit, it had made itself a war it had to win. Its center was Sol Station, orbiting around Earth, where it acted on decisions the many governments of Earth were still debating and made deals with corporations that grew about it. Its local source of supply was local space. And Earth itself had so limited an idea of what was happening above its blue skies.

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